

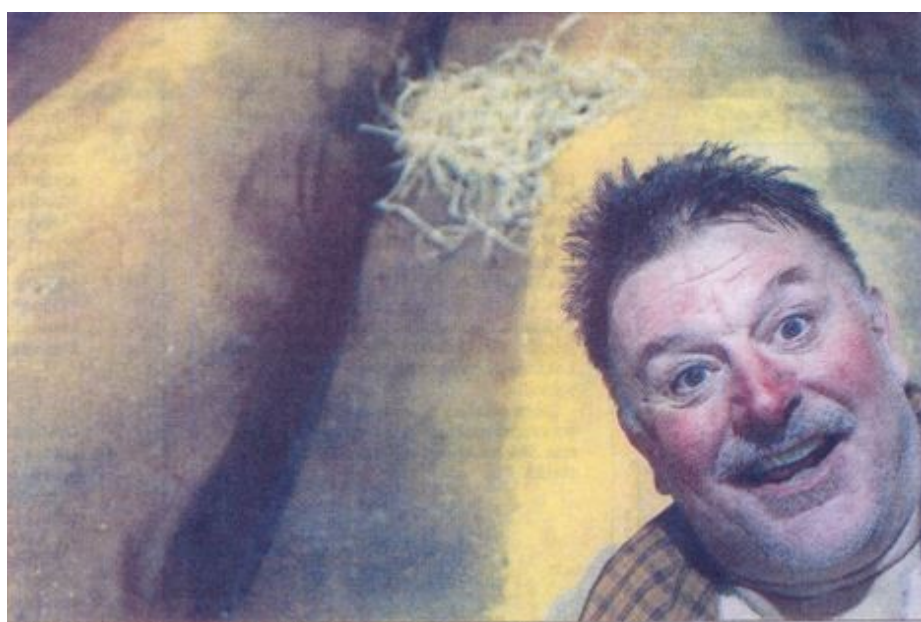
DEFINITION OF THE TERM
BY BRECHT

"The realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another is what we call the realm of gest. Physical attitude, tone of voice and facial expression are all determined by social gest: the characters are cursing, flattering, instructing one another and so on."
Brecht: *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1948), sect. 61 in Pavis 1998

GESTUS – WITHIN
THEATRE AND
ELSEWHERE

CONTEMPORARY EXAMPLES

Puntilan isäntä ja hänen renkinsä Matti
(Helsinki City Theatre 2001, dir. Kurt Nuotio)
Can Puntila's red nose be a 'gestus'?
This example is not a traditional Brecht interpretation, but theatre of 21st century – a carnivalistic attitude.



Le Signorine di Wilko (Teatro di Roma 2010)
From the novel by Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz adaptated and directed by Alvis Hermanis. Gestus is operating here as an gesture of director's work in scale of a scene, not as an element of actor's work.
It's pointing at power relations in terms of gender.



TOWARDS INTERDISCIPLINARY
ADAPTATIONS

Gestus is primarily expressed by an actor but can expand to other signs on stage. The applications differ when used in various other disciplines of performance such as dance research. In Brechtian terms a text or music is indicative of a certain gestus when it incorporates rhythm appropriate to the sense of what it is speaking of (Pavis 1998).
There has been a change of viewpoint in theatre research: from author's intention to spectator's competence in interpretation.
Suggestion: Artistic gestures that in purpose and recognisably for the audience critically point at the power relations in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, e.g. Sonya Lindfors in dance and Jani Leinonen in visual arts.

COMMENTS

ROOTS OF THE TERM

Old German word, roots in Latin, contemporary 'die Geste'. Gestus appeared already in Lessing's writing meaning a characteristic way of using one's body.

Gestus is best known by the work of German theatre theorist and reformer Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956). It appeared first in Brecht's theatre review around 1920, and in his wider use from 1929 onwards.

GESTUS IN BRECHTIAN
THEATRE

Brecht was inspired by Charlie Chaplin and his ability to express social types through silent physical movement and mime. A distinction must be made with individual gestures and Brechtian gestus. Gestus in theatre is constituted of verbal expressions in cooperation with differing physical gestures. It is a base for a special social function where all participants share the same attitude. An expression has to include a social claim in order to become *gestic*. Gestus is organically linked with Brecht's central concept *Verfremdung* (*alienation*) and with his acquaintance with Russian formalism.

Puntilan isäntä ja hänen renkinsä Matti
(*Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti* 1940/1948)
dir. Wolfgang Pintzka, Turku City Theatre 1965.
In this performance made in "authentic" Brechtian style gestus is recognisable, reflecting social relationships and status in movement and the whole presence. The servant Matti has a human face and capitalist like Puntila has a stylized mask typical to Brechtian expression.



SOURCES

Brecht, Bertolt 1964. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Trans. John Willett. London: Methuen.
Diamond, Elin 1998. *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre*. 1998. London and New York: Routledge.
Långbacka, Ralf 1982. *Muun muassa Brechtistä. Tekstejä teatterista*. Helsinki: Tammi.
Pavis, Patrice 1998. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press
Weill, Kurt 1961. "Gestus in Music" *The Tulane Drama Review* Vol. 6, No. 1, Sep.